Masthead Logo

The Palimpsest

Volume 71 | Number 4

Article 5

10-1-1990

Interpreting the Image: How to Understand Historical Photographs (Part 4)

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Part 4 in a series

Interpreting the Image

How to Understand Historical Photographs

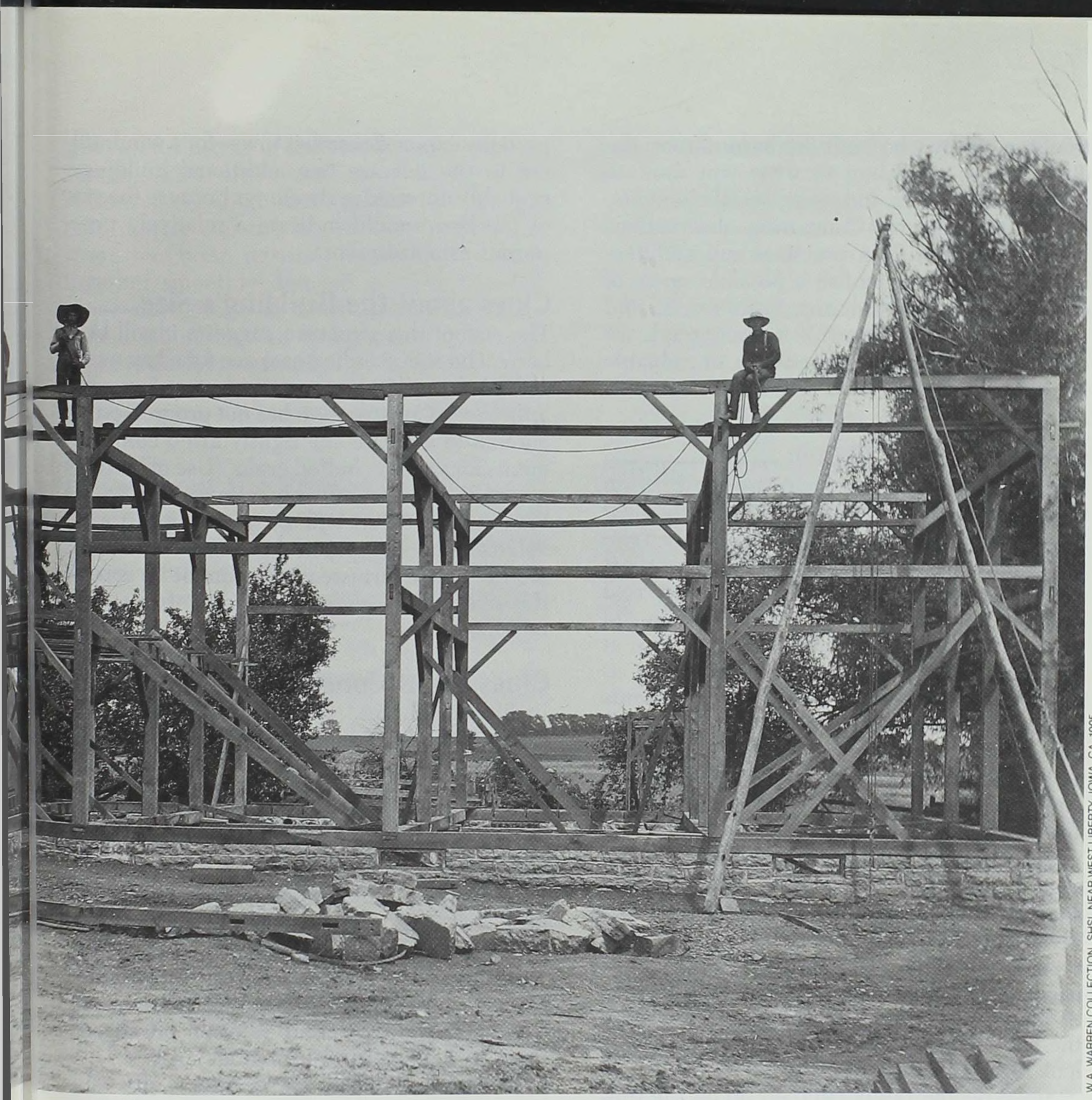
by Loren N. Horton

ALTHOUGH many historical photographs exist of people dressed up, far fewer photographs exist of people in their everyday clothes performing actual work tasks. Even when photographs were taken of work situations a century ago, many were not realistic. In many photographs, the work has stopped and all of the participants stand stiffly, facing the camera. The subjects might stand in rows in front of a work place, occasionally arranged symmetrically according to height, age, or gender. Sometimes we are hard pressed to decide exactly what tasks the people might have been performing prior to this "frozen moment of time." Because of these numerous stilted versions, we prize even more the few photographic examples that preserve the images of people actually performing an act of work.

One reason historians prize "work" photographs from the past is because they often document obsolete occupations. The photographs may be our only evidence of "how" something was done, or even "whether" something was done. Dramatic changes in agriculture, communication, transportation, construction, and more mundane and routine work have occurred since the invention of photography. Images of these changes are preserved in the photograph albums of families and in the collections of libraries, historical societies, and museums all over the country.

From them we learn how houses were built, how laundry was done and meals were prepared, how crops were planted, cultivated, and harvested, how food products were processed and stored, what sources of energy were available to run machinery, and a myriad of other understandings about the past. It is important in the history of any family, neighborhood, or community to trace such changes. In this way we can learn about how our ancestors and their friends made their livings.

Of equal importance are photographs that show us who did what sort of work, and when and where. We know that past generations had definite ideas about gender and age roles for



W.A. WARREN COLLECTION, SHSI. NEAR WEST LIBERTY, IOWA. CA. 1905

certain chores. Children were assigned certain tasks at certain times in their growing up, and elderly men and women had entirely different and well-defined chores that they were expected to perform. Whether adult women milked cows, whether boys as young as ten rode on the cast-iron seats of gang plows behind teams of horses, whether the bangboard on the corn wagon accommodated one shucker or two, were all matters of ethnic, regional, and chronological differences. Women in one community might never milk cows, while it might have been very common in a second community. Women in the second community might never have put up hay, and the men there may never have worked in the chicken house. Recording these subtle variations, photographs of work enrich our knowledge and heritage. The fabric of life in the past is made known, and it comes alive in the photographs.

The photograph here illustrates the task of constructing a barn or other large farm outbuilding. As with other photographs, the viewer needs to look at each individual element in the image, perhaps actually list or inventory them, and then try to make them fit together and make sense. Noting details of construction, size, shape, internal arrangement, and function can suggest insights about

the farm family who built the barn. Group the observations according to what you want to determine — dates, locations, social elements, or material culture. Comparing observations with histories of farm practices and architecture would help establish a possible range of dates and geographical area. From careful and painstaking examination of a photograph we can extract the greatest amount of valuable historical information.

Clues about the People

The erection of major farm buildings often required more labor than what the immediate family could provide. Friends, neighbors, relatives, and perhaps specialized craft workers might be called in for certain tasks. Until well into the twentieth century, men ordinarily did this work. In the past many farmers were at least semi-skilled in carpentry by necessity, as many farmers today must know the rudiments of engine mechanics. Simple economics dictated that certain construction and repair jobs on the farm could more quickly and cheaply be done by oneself. Specialists were expensive and might not be available when needed.

Four men are visible in the photograph. We cannot know for sure if they belong to the family who owns the farm. We surmise that they are involved in construction, but it is remotely possible that they were simply passing by when the traveling photographer was setting up equipment. Of the four, the man on the left seems the most occupied. The others look blatantly at the camera.

Since people rarely climbed up on the timbers of unfinished buildings wearing their best clothing, we assume they are wearing work clothing. All of the men are wearing hats, a useful item of social history. The rest of their clothing is not distinct enough here to tell us much historically.

Clues about the Surroundings

Few building materials lie about on the ground; there is a small heap of stones, a tongued beam, and some planks. Other flotsam and jetsam of a farmyard and a construction venture are visible. We see a couple of barrels, a couple of troughs, a bucket, a ladder, and the partially exposed wooden tower for a windmill. Off to the left are two additional buildings, probably not used as dwellings because the size of the barn would indicate a relatively prosperous establishment.

Clues about the Building's Size

The size of this structure suggests it will be a barn. The shape indicates space for a hay mow, stables for draft hourses, and stanchions for milk cows. Construction has not progressed far enough to indicate any tightly fitted compartments for storing shelled grain. (Use of barns as granaries was not uncommon in the Midwest.) Presumably there will be places for storing vehicles and equipment. Because we cannot see the entire farmstead, we cannot be sure of the exclusive or general uses of any one building.

Clues about Construction

In building barns, when certain methods of framing involve raising preassembled components into place, the process is called "raising" the barn. The method used here seems to be a combination of timber framing (requiring heavy timbers and mostly practiced before sawed lumber was available) and mill framing (in which the milled support members often have extensions that branch off into a Y). Balloon framing, more common in houses, was sometimes used in barn building. More often, after the turn of the century, barns were built from plans and pre-cut lumber purchased through catalogs or from lumberyards.

It appears that all the vertical walls have been framed. Components that seem to be resting at an angle may be framed portions completed on the ground, ready to be raised upright by pulleys, or they may be braces supporting the superstructure until additional framing timbers can be nailed or pegged into place.

Other than the framing techniques, little of the "how" of work is actually portrayed here. We know that the men probably used the ladder to reach their positions, the tripod and ropes to lift materials to higher levels of work.

The foundation has been laid very, very carefully, even though the construction site is on quite level ground. Note the even dressing

and careful fitting of the stone blocks and the running ashlar bond used in the laying of the masonry. We might assume that the troughs hold mortar and the barrels hold water. The stone has been partially dressed (cut to fit together smoothly) but left rusticated on the outer side. None of these factors suggests a rude outbuilding. In fact, barns with heavy timbers do not need such sophisticated foundations because the timbers will support the weight.

Clues about the Photographer

Why did a client want this photograph made? What was the photograph trying to show? Was it a successful effort?

Placement of the structure within the photograph is excellent. The building is framed by the windmill tower to the left and trees to the right, by the adequate amount of yard in the foreground and by plenty of sky to silhouette the dramatic view of the workers. Much care went into the correct placement of the camera to handle all of this.

But why was it important to show the unfinished building? We can easily understand why a farmer would be proud of a completed barn, the newest and perhaps the largest in the neighborhood. It is even reasonable that a craftsperson might want to record steps in construction. But if this photograph is not one of a series, why was it taken? Did the building belong to a prominent person? Were the workers friends of the photographer? Was the photographer attempting to record historically important scenes, even at this early date? Perhaps the photographer was conscious of the attraction of "before and after" pictures, intending to photograph the completed barn. For this photograph, the only clues may be the questions we ask and the options they provide.

Conclusions

The photograph tells us that rope and galvanized buckets were available in the area, but that wooden-staved barrels were still common — thus showing a transition between periods or stages of technology. The building skills of working with heavy timbering and dressed stone were practiced here. Wooden windmill towers instead of the metal towers were still in use.

Clearly the photographer did not intend to capture the entire spirit of the building process. The partially erected structure is the focus.

A color photograph would reveal the barn color, of course, but in reality barn paint was often simply the cheapest paint available. Red was very common in the Midwest.

Left to our imagination — or family records yet to be found — are the reasons behind choosing this method of framing and location, the specific uses of the structure, and the reason for laying such a sophisticated and finished foundation under a barn, as well as whether the farmer did the work or imported specialized craft workers. □

For More Information, Consult These Sources

Susan H. Rogers, *The Changing Farmstead: A Selective Biography* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1990). The best single resource on farm buildings in the Midwest. Contains fifty-one references to books and articles about barns and other buildings of the farmstead.

Information about barns predominates in the following sources, but they also contain material about other buildings of the farmstead.

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